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SUBJECT: IMPLEMENTING PARTY RESOLUTIONS ON  
- RELIGION AND MINORITIES

REF: A. HANOI 1687 B. HANOI 0175  
- C. FBIS 20030324000089 D. 02 HANOI 1653

1. (SBU) Summary. According to CPV and GVN authorities in Hanoi and the Northwest Highlands, new CPV resolutions on ethnic minorities and religion do little more than reiterate long-standing policies, while nonetheless trying to elevate attention to these issues and the need for better implementation. On the ground, nothing seems to have changed. Officials have refuted allegations of forced renunciations of faith, while confirming that evangelism is essentially illegal. Despite more conciliatory comments from the new Chairman of Government Committee on Religious Affairs, most CPV officials seem to view religion as an inherited quality, like ethnicity, which makes them reluctant to accept the possibility of conversions. Their own underground history likely also makes them unusually sensitive to "threats" from evangelism and "illegal" gatherings in Vietnam's mountainous areas. End Summary.

2. (U) The second session of the seventh plenum of the Communist Party of Vietnam's 9th Central Committee in January adopted new, sweeping resolutions of CPV policy regarding work on religious affairs, work with ethnic minorities, and land use (ref B). Ref C provides full text of the religious affairs resolution.

The Hanoi view  
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3. (U) In a meeting with Pol/C on June 30, Dr. Nguyen Duc Lu, Director of the Ho Chi Minh National Political Academy's Center for "Science of Belief and Religion," explained the passage of the resolutions on religion and minorities in particular as a clear symbol of the importance the CPV places on handling these issues well. (Note: As reported in ref D, this Center not only trains CPV and GVN cadres on religious policy, but also provides recommendations on policy and regulations related to religion. End note) He emphasized that these resolutions did not/not indicate a shift in CPV policy. However, he noted that previous CPV policy on religion had been issued by the Politburo; the decision to have the full Central Committee consider and approve this resolution demonstrated the broad scope and support for the CPV policy. He added that the Central Committee resolutions, and expected subsequent study sessions at all levels of the CPV, would "popularize" and "unify" the "positive" views of the CPV toward ethnic and religious affairs and "encourage greater understanding." Dr. Lu reiterated that the CPV view is that "religion has a good role in promoting humanitarianism, good conduct, and culture."

4. (U) Dr. Lu nonetheless cited concerns within the CPV about the "threat" from "hostile forces" who use illegal religious activities or illegal religions to undermine the State -- key themes of the resolution on religion. He claimed, however, that such concerns did not stem from specific recent incidents, much less the 2001 demonstrations in the Central Highlands. When pressed, he also admitted that "hostile forces" -- while being "hard to define" -- referred to individuals and organizations based overseas, and not/not to any programs or policies of the USG.

5. (U) Dr. Lu noted some "confusion" about what -- exactly -- constitutes "legal" and "illegal" religious activities, and said his staff is currently conducting research on this issue. The CPV and GVN are still drafting regulations covering religious activities that will spell this out in greater specificity, but much remains unresolved. He has already participated in two conferences on these regulations; he admitted a "lack of unanimity." He declined to predict when the regulations would be passed, but indicated that the goal was in the next year or two. Still further ahead would be an even more definitive national law on religion, which the National Assembly would pass. He expressed frank incredulity that the USG did not regulate the tenets of faith of religious denominations and "cults," noting the possibility of cults teaching "immoral practices." Pol/C explained the US Constitutional separation of Church and State, and official respect for the

personal nature of faith.

16. (U) When Pol/C described continuing reports from Lai Chau, Lao Cai, and elsewhere of attempts at forced renunciations of faith, primarily among ethnic minority Protestants (ref a), Dr. Lu emphasized that any such efforts would indeed be illegal and that no one had the right either to force someone to believe or not to believe. He implied that such reports might be fabricated by outside agitators. He added that Vietnamese remember how the French authorities had used the "pretext" of protecting Catholics in order to colonialize Vietnam, and implied that the CPV had to be vigilant to ensure that the "hostile forces" had no similar plans using a Protestant excuse.

17. (U) Dr. Lu was vague when asked about the legality of evangelism and proselytism. He initially indicated that Vietnamese have the right to spread their faith, but then added that, in principle, people who do so should be graduates from a recognized religious training center. (Note: The Protestant Seminary in Hanoi has been closed for a decade, and the seminary affiliated with the Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam only opened in 2003. End note)

On the ground

18. (U) To determine provincial implementation of and attention to these resolutions and to investigate claims of harassment of ethnic minorities, Pol/C and Pol FSN visited Lai Chau and Son La provinces during the week of June 23. Both have only a minority of Kinh residents, with ethnic Thais predominant in each. Each has significant Hmong populations and borders with Laos. Lai Chau also has a border with China. Both are among the poorest provinces in the country in terms of per capita income.

19. (U) Provincial authorities in both Lai Chau and Son La flatly asserted that there were no religious believers of any kind living in these provinces. Not only are there no Catholic churches or Protestant worship centers, there are not even any Buddhist temples, they claimed, citing the remote locations and different cultural traditions of the ethnic minorities. They admitted that that many, perhaps most, families (Kinh and minorities alike) engage in some traditional ancestor worship. At the same time, they stressed that all citizens have the freedom to believe or not to believe, as "guaranteed" in the Constitution. Lai Chau officials admitted that there had been some efforts at evangelism by Hmong Protestants, noting that such activities were "not according to the law" (while not explicitly labeling them "illegal.") They declined to comment on whether anyone had been arrested or punished for having engaged in evangelism.

10. (U) In the absence of worship centers, Son La officials escorted Pol/C to visit a shrine to a 15th century Vietnamese king who once visited this scenic spot. Despite official prohibitions on "superstitious activities," the shrine was full of recent high school graduates lighting incense to pray for good luck on the July 4 nationwide university examinations. The Ministry of Culture and Information has just devoted 4 billion VND (USD 267,000) to construct a temple-like building adjacent to the cave in which the shrine has long existed.

11. (U) Officials in both provinces firmly denied the possibility of the reports Pol/C cited about harassment and forced renunciation of faith. They claimed such incidents were "impossible" given the non-existence of religious believers. They insisted that there were no official programs to convince people either not to believe in religion or to renounce religious belief. They declined to comment on whether any official discovered to have attempted forced renunciation of faith could be punished administratively or under the law. Lai Chau officials also flatly denied reports of a December 2002 gassing episode in Hoi Huong hamlet, although another provincial official had at the time confirmed a barebones version of this incident by phone to Embassy.

12. (U) The passage of the seventh plenum resolutions on minorities and religion indicated the "full importance" the CPV and GVN places on proper work in these fields, officials noted, while insisting that there was no change in Vietnam's "consistent" policies. They emphasized that there were no new programs, initiatives, or training efforts following up on these resolutions, and claimed that there had not even been any special classes or meetings to discuss the contents of these resolutions. When pressed (with Pol/C reading from a VNA account of instructions given to the Ethnic Minorities Commission Chairman at the May 2003 Cabinet meeting), Lai Chau officials admitted that a delegation from Commission had visited the province in early June to "seek opinions" on how better to handle minority affairs. Officials said that

their bottom line response was "give us more resources."

13. (U) Officials uniformly stressed that the most important way to help ethnic minorities was to promote overall economic development, as well as related programs against hunger and illiteracy, in order to "guarantee equality and solidarity." Infrastructural investment under Program 135 was an important aspect of these efforts, including roads, schools, and health clinics, they noted. They nonetheless admitted that no educational programs in minority languages were yet available. Lai Chau is now seeking to popularize junior high school education. Son La has yet to achieve even universal primary education, although it has set a goal to ensure universal junior high school education by 2008.

14. (U) Despite the predominance of ethnic minority populations and the reiteration of the importance of ethnic minority policy by the 7th plenum, only about 30 pct of provincial-level cadres in Lai Chau are now ethnic minorities (rising to 70-80 pct at the local levels), officials admitted. In Son La, provincial officials claimed to have no idea of these ratios, but most of the provincial officials who met with Pol/C were ethnic Kinh or mixed Kinh/minority. Notably, when the ethnic Kinh "handlers" took Pol/C and FSN to visit a "typical" Thai residence (of the village party chief), they ignored the well-known Thai habit of taking off shoes at the entrance to the house, took no note of the row of sandals outside the door and the bare feet of the host and hostess, and even appeared nonplussed when Pol/C and FSN took off their own shoes before entering.

Comment

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15. (SBU) Freedom of religion continues to mean different things to Americans and Vietnamese officials. In a recent meeting with Ambassador, the new head of the Government Committee on Religious Affairs took a generally conciliatory line. Overall, however, the more general CPV view appears to be that religion is essentially an inherited characteristic, much like ethnicity. While the CPV's own history demonstrates how young idealists can be turned into Communists by reading seminal documents or listening to a Ho Chi Minh, current-day CPV logic appears to try to rule out the possibility of conversion after contact with a religious believer or first reading of the Bible, Koran, or Buddhist teachings. That may be why the CPV/GVN is seemingly reluctant to register new churches (or temples) even within the framework of already legal religious organizations, much less reach formal acceptance of "new" religious bodies like the Ba'hai, Baptists, or the United Buddhist Church of Vietnam. Alternatively, it is exactly because they are well aware of how successfully the CPV's ideological and administrative base grew underground in the first half of the 20th century that CPV leaders remain sharply alive to the "dangers" posed in particular by non-recognized Protestants targeting already marginalized ethnic grounds in sensitive border provinces, and why they are seeking to ensure that all activities in these areas be fully and openly "legal" and under their supervision.

BURGHARDT